

The Challenge of Cultural Relativism

Cultural Relativism

- Cultural Relativism is the idea that what is morally right or wrong does not depend on some objective standard that is to be universally applied. Instead right and wrong are exclusively determined by social and cultural traditions and beliefs.
- This line of thought, perhaps more than any other has caused people to be skeptical about ethics as a universal project.
- For many, the vast variety of moral systems in the world is the best evidence that the search for a universal morality is a fruitless exercise in utopian fantasy.

Eskimo Culture

- Eskimos: Native tribes living in Alaska, northern Canada, Greenland, and northeastern Siberia.

Eskimo Culture

- Cultural differences relative to our modern sensibilities:
- Eskimo “marriages” were very different.
 - Men often had more than one wife.
 - It was considered a sign of hospitality to “lend” a wife to a visiting guest.
 - Within a community, a dominant male might demand—and get—regular sexual access to other men’s wives.
 - The women, on the other hand, were free to leave their husbands and take up with another, provided the jilted husband did not cause too much trouble.

Eskimo Culture

- Conceptions of life and death were very different as well.
 - Elderly enfeebled members of the family were sometimes left in the snow to die.
 - Moreover, infanticide was not uncommon and permitted at the parent's discretion, with no social stigma attached.
 - Female babies were especially likely to be killed.
- Considering this and other examples, how then, one might ask, can we possibly reconcile such moral divergence between cultures?
- “Perhaps we can't and moreover, we shouldn't” says the cultural relativist.

Relativistic Claims

- Five claims made by cultural relativists.
 1. Different societies have different moral codes.
 2. The moral code of a society determines what is right within that society; that is, if the moral code of a society says that a certain action is right, then that action *is* right, at least within that society.
 3. There is no objective standard that can be used to judge one society's code as better than another's. There are no moral truths that hold for all people at all times.
 4. The moral code of our society has no special status; it is but one among many.
 5. It is arrogant for us to judge other cultures. We should always be tolerant of them.

The Cultural Differences Argument

- A common form of argument for relativism begins with facts about cultural diversity, and draws conclusions regarding morality. Let us consider this type of argument.
 1. The Eskimos saw nothing wrong with infanticide, whereas Americans believe infanticide is immoral.
 2. Therefore, infanticide is neither objectively right or objectively wrong. It is merely a matter of opinion, which varies from culture to culture.
- Is this argument sound?

The Cultural Differences Argument

- The argument is not sound.
- We have accepted the premise of the argument as true, so the argument must be invalid, its conclusion must not follow from the truth of the premises.
- Why not?
- The premise is a claim about what people believe. The conclusion is a claim about what is actually the case. The second doesn't follow from the first.

The Cultural Differences Argument

- To see why this does not follow consider the following parallel argument.
 1. The Backwardians believe the earth is flat. The Forwardians believe the earth is a sphere.
 2. Therefore there is no objective geographical truth about the shape of the earth.
- While the cultural differences argument fails to establish the truth of cultural relativism, that doesn't mean cultural relativism is false, only that we have not successfully argued it is true.
- Considering the historical and intuitive importance of the idea we should continue and examine it more closely. What, for example are the consequences of Cultural Relativism?

Consequences of CR

- If CR is true then we lose the ability to condemn any foreign cultural practices as morally inferior to our own.
 - China, Tiananmen Square massacre.
 - Nazi Germany.
- We could no longer criticize the social code of our own society.
 - Consider the Indian Caste system.
- We must abandon the idea of moral progress as we know it.
 - Consider the quest for universal suffrage and human rights.

Consequences of CR

- Because of these consequences many have been led to deny cultural relativism.
- It seems that any theory that allows that slavery and genocide are morally permissible (even if only in certain social contexts) is not acceptable.
- If we want to deny Cultural Relativism that means that there must be some, at least minimal, universal moral code. But then how do we account for the vast moral diversity of the world?

Universal Morality

- There are a huge number of factors that make up cultural differences, and moral beliefs are only a part of those.
- Therefore, when we examine what seems to be a huge, irreconcilable moral difference between cultures we often find the differences are not as great as they appear.
 - India and Bovine re-incarnation case.
 - Eskimo's seeming cavalier attitude toward life and death.

Universal Morality

- It is also important to notice that aside from the great differences there are also values shared without exception by all cultures.
 1. Loving and protecting children.
 2. Truth telling
 3. Prohibition on murder
 4. Keeping promises
- All of these are key to the survival of any society, and are therefore features of all known human societies, although, of course, they may very well differ on the acceptable exceptions to these rules.
- OK, the cultural relativist might say, but what then is the status of these differences? On what basis do you say that what you see as the barbarous practices of other cultures are bad?

Excision Case Study

- To answer this question let us consider a more modern and real moral dilemma.
 - In 1996 17 yr. old Fauziya Kassindja arrived at Newark International Airport and asked for asylum.
 - Fauziya had fled her native Togo, West Africa to avoid a procedure known alternatively as “excision” or “female circumcision” or “female genital mutilation.”
 - Excision is practiced in certain areas mostly in Africa and Asia, about 120 million females have undergone the procedure.
 - Often this practice is forced on women against their will, though there are still places where it involves an elaborate tribal ritual which the girls look forward to as it signals their acceptance into the adult world. It is practiced by both Christians and Muslims.

Excision Case Study

- Were we to come to the conclusion that excision is bad. Would we be unjustifiably imposing our own cultural morality where it doesn't belong? Or is there a sound basis for condemning such practices?
- To examine this question let us consider the arguments that are brought by those who defend the practice.

Excision Case Study

1. Women who are incapable of sexual pleasure are less likely to be promiscuous; this means less unwanted pregnancies in married women.
2. Furthermore they are less likely to cheat on their husbands, and due to their minds not being occupied with sex they will be more attentive to husbands and children.
3. Husbands, for their part, are said to enjoy sex more with excised wives as un-excised wives are seen as unclean and immature.

Excision Case Study

- It would be easy to ridicule and dismiss such arguments. But instead it might be valuable to notice something about them: they all share a single feature.
- All of the arguments attempt to justify excision by showing that it is beneficial. Men, women and children are said to be better off in some sense when women are excised.
- Thus, we might accept this as an appeal to a certain kind of universal rational: Practices that are helpful to the people affected by them are good. Practices that are harmful to the people affected by them are bad.

The Value of Tolerance

- Despite the arguments just presented, thoughtful people might still be reluctant to criticize other cultures in the name of 'tolerance.' Why?
- This is often the legitimate result of a recognition of the value of tolerance and a certain moral humility, especially considering the western world's tragic history of colonialism. This history unfortunately abounding in stories of the wholesale destruction of native cultures in the name of Christianity and moral and political enlightenment.
- However, it is important to note that tolerance cannot be an absolute value, taken too far it is self-contradictory.

The Value of Tolerance

- Claim: **We should always be tolerant of other cultures.**
 - On the surface this claim denies that there is any such thing as objective moral truth, since other cultures, no matter what their moral practices, should be tolerated and not condemned.
 - What one might fail to notice is that the claim of universal tolerance itself implicitly relies on a universal moral claim: the claim that tolerance is a universal moral good.
 - Now comes the self-contradiction: If tolerance is a universal moral good, then what of cultures that practice intolerance? Should we tolerate them? **Do we tolerate intolerance?**

The Value of Tolerance

- Perhaps the claim about the value of tolerance should be amended: Tolerance is the default position with regard to other cultures, this should be maintained until an objective case can be made that non-tolerance (perhaps even intervention) would prevent great and grievous harm.
- This allows us to legitimately differentiate between two cases we have considered.
 1. The Eskimo case, in which the morally difficult practices were an adaptation to an extreme environment which themselves were prevented even greater harm (the non-survival of the family).
 2. The excision case, where offering Fauziya asylum and bringing world pressure to bear against female genital mutilation will very plausibly save a generation of women from mutilation without for-seeable sufficiently negative side-effects to undermine the good effects of the prohibition on excision.

Back to the 5 Claims of CR

- Now that we understand a little more about what is at stake in the Cultural relativism debate let us re-examine the 5 claims we introduced at the beginning of the chapter.
- ① Different societies have different moral codes.
 - This is certainly true, but as we have now seen, it doesn't necessarily lead to CR.

Back to the 5 Claims of CR

- ② The moral code of a society determines what is right within that society; that is, if the moral code of a society says that a certain action is right, then that action *is* right, at least within that society.
 - It is true that the moral code of a society is closely tied to what people believe is right. It is not true that just because a people believe something is right, it actually is right. The moral beliefs of cultures, while they are to be respected, are not infallible. They can be wrong about what is right, as in Slavery, Nazism's "final solution," and female genital mutilation.

Back to the 5 Claims of CR

- ③ There is no objective standard that can be used to judge one society's code as better than another's. There are no moral truths that hold for all people at all times.
 - If we want to condemn such practices as genocide and genital mutilation (and I am assuming we do) then we must appeal to some form of universal moral truth. We have suggested at least one such moral claim.

Back to the 5 Claims of CR

- ④ The moral code of our society has no special status; it is but one among many.
 - Our moral code is but one among many, but the implicit assumption behind this claim that therefore none of the many can be any better or worse than others is false. Any of the numerous moral codes we encounter can have the special status of being better, closer to some universal ideal, than ours.

Back to the 5 Claims of CR

- ⑤ It is arrogant for us to judge other cultures.
We should always be tolerant of them.
 - Tolerance is a moral good, to a point. As we have seen, the “always” in this claim makes it problematic. Must we tolerate intolerance?

Moral Humility

- Despite not being the viable universal moral framework that it set out to be, cultural relativism has some deep lessons for us.
- Primarily we may learn some much needed **moral humility**. Recognizing that some of our deeply held moral beliefs may be social products rather than true moral insight opens the door to forms of thoughtful tolerance this world is deeply in need of.
- Herodotus himself saw the need for this: “Everyone without exception believes his own native customs, and the religion he was brought up on, to be the best.”
- Cultural relativism teaches us that we may learn from others, as well as teach them.